

***Godot is a Woman*, Pleasance Theatre Islington, London, UK**
Devised & written by Cordelia Stevenson, Josie Underwood and Jack Wakely
Directed by Laura Killeen
Produced by Silent Faces
Featuring Jack Wakely, Josie Underwood, Cara Withers
Date Wednesday 9th June 2021
Review by Leah Sidi

The lights come up on the small stage at the Pleasance Theatre Upstairs and we are faced with an almost-familiar scene. The stage is bare and grey. In the corner a bare tree rises up through a pile of rubble. Three clowns dressed in worn-out black suits and bowler hats loiter on stage. They are waiting.

Something is off. Stage left is a dirty white phone box. The air is filled with an annoying, tinny tune. The clowns are on hold.

Godot is a Woman revolves around a simple conceit. Three people wish to perform *Waiting for Godot*. They are not men. And so they wait, onstage, for the Beckett estate to receive their phone call and give them permission to perform this famous work. They are literally waiting for *Waiting for Godot*.

As they wait, they play. Their play circulates around *Waiting for Godot*, approaching it obliquely through mime, critique, satire and visual punning. There is a smattering of lines from the play, well within the limits of fair use. Sometimes the show spirals away from Beckett into drag, dance performances and encomiums to Madonna. In the second half the performers stage a trial for the Beckett estate, picking apart the estate's objections to casting women in *Waiting for Godot* in a sometimes-hilarious array of legalistic skits.

Godot is a Woman is a cabaret-style performance by Silent Faces Theatre Company, performed by women actors Cara Withers and Josie Underwood, and non-binary actor Jack Wakely. The show draws on a range of performance styles, from dialogue to lip synching, mime to drag to dance sequences. At times a little over-earnest in its critique, the performance nonetheless offers a sustained and entertaining engagement both with *Waiting for Godot* itself, and with the Beckett estate's decisions not to allow actors who are not men to perform it. Towards the end of the production the performance takes on its own voice more clearly, becoming a joyful musical celebration of the contributions of women and non-binary people to the history of performance and music, deliberately veering away from a critique of the past towards a celebration of collaboration and the future of performance.

Silent Faces are a mime, clowning and dance company, whose website describes their work as 'physical political fooling'.¹ The performers have a real skill in mime and clowning, and sections of *Godot is a Woman* based in physical theatre are the strongest. At times, sections of Vladimir and Estragon's verbal play are evoked through complex and brilliantly executed mime sequences. An extended sequence of exchanges of bowler hats for example, extends the hat-play and shoe exchanges of Beckett's work – evoking the combined futility and comedy of the Beckett's wordplay. A little earlier in the performance Withers pastiches the scene in which Vladimir provides Estragon with a carrot. Withers produces not one but three

¹ <https://www.silentfaces.uk/>

carrots ceremoniously, and then proceeds to further while away the time by peeling hers before eating it.

Watching *Godot is a Woman*, it struck me that the performance makes two separate cases for allowing women to perform *Waiting for Godot*. The first is the straightforward case which the performers voice throughout the play: that banning women and non-binary people from performing a work is discriminatory, especially a work which is supposedly about a 'universal human experience'. The performers remonstrate (accurately, in my view) that to insist that only male performers can portray the universal without inviting a distracting specificity is to code the universal as male – in other words, to reinforce patriarchy. The presence of a female body should not in itself invite more specificity than a male one for an enlightened twenty-first century audience. To suggest otherwise is to frame the female body as already-other, inevitably sexualised and somehow diminished. (Samuel Beckett himself shows up halfway through the show in the form of Wakely screaming at Withers and Underwood for 'getting your tits all over my favourite play!')

Driven by what we might call the 'argument from universality', the performers go on to unpack the further reasons that the Beckett estate have given to prevent women performers from performing *Waiting for Godot* mostly during an extended court sequence in which they put the estate literally on trial. These include the claim that Estragon cannot be played by a woman because his frequent need to urinate 'suggests a problem with his prostate.' People without prostates, the estate's fictional lawyers argue, could not possibly execute such a performance. Cue a brilliant sketch of Wakely and Underwood in drag giving a medical presentation about prostates ending in an actual toilet break. This leads to a much more serious scene in which Wakely and Underwood make the case that restricting casting on the base of any gender discriminates against non-binary performers who, under these rules, would be unlikely to be allowed to play in any binary roles at all, which of course means the majority of theatrical works.

These are, I think, the more obvious arguments for the Beckett estate's loosening its hold over the gendering of casting choices. They are delivered earnestly and humorously throughout *Godot is a Woman*. However, there is a second argument to make here, which is embodied in the dramaturgy of the show itself. Whilst still on hold, the clowns see a book lowered in front of them from the heavens. It is Beckett's playtext. As they attempt to reach it, is pulled out of reach and a voice booms 'YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SAY THOSE WORDS'. It is already clear at this point that the clowns know the playtext and are familiar with Beckett's work. They understand 'THOSE WORDS' and have them stored in memory. They *could* say them. They exist in their (and the audiences') individual and cultural memories. The absurdity of preventing these bodies from simply voicing those (absurdist) words fills the show's awkward silences.

This is emphasised in a performance which is soaked in Beckettian imagery and pastiche. During the court case, Withers argues that the plays that Beckett wrote for women actors are themselves structured around the experience of confinement and speechlessness. She slides smoothly into a monologue performed in the style of *Not-I's Mouth* using a torch to light her lips, narrating the plight of *Happy Days'* Winnie. The irony of preventing women from speaking the words of Beckett's most famous work, when his two most famous works for women are largely about the experience of not being able to speak meaningfully, is not lost.

All this points to the fact that Beckett's most famous works have already transcended their original contexts and become malleable staples in anglophone and francophone culture. No insistence on gendered castings will prevent this from happening. Through their hat-play, their visual punning, their waiting and Withers' monologue, *Silent Faces* are already *doing* *Godot* and *Mouth* without saying 'THOSE WORDS'. The visual lexicon of Beckett's works and the rhythm and tenor of his speech are so imbued in our culture that to a certain extent one does not need to *speak* *Godot*, to do *Godot*.

Towards the end of the production, the questions of who can do *Godot* is widened to the question of who can speak at all in theatrical space. The issue of the lack of roles for trans and non-binary performers is emphasised as an important reason approach theatrical works flexibly. *Silent Faces* respond to the prohibitions on who can do *Godot* by joyously filling the stage with all kinds of other forms of speech, song, dance and cabaret. They end their show by abandoning of *Godot* completely in favour of a hectic dance sequence which sweeps the audience up into their celebration of theatrical solidarity. We could consider the space of the stage firmly reclaimed. Nevertheless, there is a slight dampening of this celebration when they finally hang up the phone and head off stage to just 'go and do something else.' Because, after all, what they had wanted was to do *Godot*.

The canonical staging of Beckett's works will remain canonical, no matter how productions diverge from them in future. Beckett's own insistence on homogenous productions means that the actions, setting and appearances of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky have gained a profound cultural weight. We might paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt to suggest that when we watch *Waiting for Godot* we, performers and audience alike 'are all [already] the unintended consequences of *Waiting for Godot*'.² By skilfully riffing on (and ribbing) Beckett's oeuvre, *Godot is a Woman* reminds the audience that allowing changes into casting is not to risk losing *Waiting for Godot*, but may well allow new understandings of it to arise.

Leah Sidi is a Lecturer (teaching) in Health Humanities at University College London. Her research focuses on representations of mental illness in twentieth-century theatre, media and feminist writing. Her monograph, Sarah Kane's Theatre of Psychic Life is forthcoming with Methuen Drama.

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.5 'we are all the unintended consequences of *Hamlet*'.